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AUTHOR Henry, Justina; Wiley, Barbara Joan
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ABSTRACT

Interactive writing is a term coined by a research group of faculty members from the Ohio State University and teachers from the Columbus Public Schools. The group examined Moira McKenzie's (1985) work in shared writing and adopted the approach as having power in helping children understand the writing process. They varied the approach with a "share the pen" technique that involved children in contributing individual letters and words to a group meeting. As more and more teachers have tried the technique in their classrooms, they have generated a plethora of questions they want answered. This article aims to address their needs. The article poses and answers the following questions: What is interactive writing? What happens during the interactive writing experience? What do I need to get started? Why do capital letters appear in the middle of words in some interactive writing products? Are the children's feelings hurt when fix-it tape is used to correct their errors? How does the teacher decide who will share the pen? How can I extend the word study that emerges in interactive writing lessons to other parts of my program? and How can I learn more about interactive writing? (NKA)

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Interactive Writing.

by Justina Henry and Barbara Joan Wiley

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Classroom Connections

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About Interactive Writing

Justina Henry and Barbara Joan Wiley

Literacy Collaborative, The Ohio State University

This column is designed to serve Reading Recovery partners: the classroom teachers who work together with Reading Recovery teachers to teach children to read and write.

The Literacy Collaborative is a long-term professional development program designed to provide a comprehensive school-wide approach to literacy instruction in the primary grades. The Literacy Collaborative developers

- provide a framework for literacy lessons that build connections between reading and writing,
- support local capacity by training a building-level literacy coordinator, and
- require that the safety net of Reading Recovery be available for children in the first grade who are at-risk of reading failure.

The Literacy Collaborative framework consists of eight elements. Four of the elements focus on reading: reading aloud to children, shared reading, guided reading, and independent reading. Also, there are four contexts for writing: shared writing, interactive writing, writing workshop, and independent writing.

Interactive writing is a term coined by a research group of faculty members from The Ohio State University and teachers from Columbus Public Schools, Ohio. The group examined Moira McKenzie's (1985) work in shared writing and enthusiastically adopted the approach as having power in helping children understand the writing process. They varied the approach with a "share the pen" technique that involved children in contributing individual letters and words to the group writing. As more and more teachers have tried the technique in their classrooms, they have generated a plethora of questions that they want answered. Hopefully, this article will address their needs.

What is interactive writing?

During an interactive writing experi-

ence, the teacher and students jointly compose and write a message. The purpose is to develop children's understanding of the writing process, concepts about print, and functions of written language. Interactive writing also helps emerging readers and writers learn about letters and how words work.

What happens during the interactive writing experience?

The children and teacher discuss a shared classroom experience and then determine a purpose for writing. For instance, after listening to a rereading of a familiar story, the class may decide to retell the story in a class-made book. The teacher and children gather close to an easel, discuss their ideas, negotiate the text, and share the pen to write a few sentences on chart paper. With a clear view of the print, the children are able to notice and discuss features of the letters and words as the text is written. The writing of a single text may take a few days.

During the lesson, the teacher and children engage in a discussion of the content of the text and how to write the words. The teacher responds to the children's instructional needs by taking opportunities to teach letter formation, writing and reading vocabulary, and strategies for hearing sounds in words. The teacher often demonstrates the teaching points on a white-board or Magna-Doodle.

What do I need to get started?

Interactive writing takes place in an area that is as well engineered as the dashboard of an expensive automobile. Everything that could possibly be needed during a lesson is at hand. The

teacher can easily grab what she needs, or point to and touch a chart she wants to use as a resource.

The children sit on a rug facing the teacher who is sitting in a chair next to an easel that is wide enough to hold a large piece of chart paper. This wide paper offers enough room for children to write three or four words on one line of text. This reinforces the learning of the early literacy behaviors of left-to-right directionality, one-to-one matching, and return sweep. If the paper is too narrow and only two words fit on a line, then the children might think that the writing is laid out more like a list rather than a line of print across one page.

The teacher has black, pointed markers that are easier for children to see and use than colored ones with angled tips. She has materials that she can use for demonstrating such things as proper letter formation, analogies in spelling, and checking to see which word looks right. She may prefer to use whiteboards and dry erase markers, a Magna Doodle, miniature chalkboards and chalk, or wipe-off boards and wax crayons. She has fix-it tape to use to correct errors.

Nearby, within arms' reach, are a variety of reference charts the teacher and the children can use. For example, the teacher may have a name chart of the children's names listed in alphabetic order, an alphabet chart with pictures of items that begin with the corresponding initial letter, and a pocket chart filled with high frequency words. She has pointers of various lengths to use when rereading texts or when searching for letters, words, and punctuation.

As the children change in their ability as writers, the teacher's tools will vary as well. For example, the charts will look different. Name charts in classrooms with emerging writers will have

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first names only. As their writing develops, they will need name charts with first and last names so that they can learn to make more connections to more chunks and blends.

Why do capital letters appear in the middle of words in some interactive writing products?

Emergent writers are more familiar with capital letters. Maybe because these are the letters they see more frequently in the environmental print which surrounds them—advertisement marquee, headlines in newspapers, book titles, and products in the grocery store. Also, their parents or their pre-school teachers may teach them to write their names in all capital letters because lines are easier to make than curves and circles. Consequently, some children come to school knowing just capital letters. Their teachers accept and build on these strengths. For instance, Robert may come up to the easel and write a capital R in the word *tuRtle* because he knows R from his name. The teacher will celebrate his contribution which encourages engagement and risk-taking, supporting further learning. However, when children begin to notice more features of letters while reading lots of little books, then the teacher's expectations will change and she will encourage them to make the shift to lowercase letters within words in their writing.

Are the children's feelings hurt when fix-it tape is used to correct their errors?

The evaluation of products as being right or wrong is a learned behavior. Classrooms that look at learning as a problem-solving process believe that learning occurs when children are making mistakes as well as when children are producing accurate work. In these classrooms, fix-it tape is a helpful tool that writers need—not something that covers up an embarrassment. How teachers sensitively respond to errors shapes how children evaluate their products. For example, Kindergarten teacher, Sharon Esswein, and her students wrote a retelling of the folktale, *Henny Penny*. In this story a hen is hit on the head with an acorn. She thinks that the sky is falling and goes to tell the king. On her way she meets many animals who join her. The foolish animals are eventually joined by a fox who leads them to his den and cooks them for his family's dinner.

The following example illustrates that the teacher (Esswein) has conveyed to the children that their role is to be problem-finders and problem-solvers. Noticing one's errors and fixing them are integral parts of their learning together. Cody (student) notices that the letter formation of the N a classmate has written is not quite right.

Cody: I'm worried about something.
Esswein: What are you worried about,

Cody?

Cody: It's not right down here.
Esswein: Oh, you were thinking that line should go down to the bottom. Brian, can we try? He's worried that that line needs to go down to the bottom. Would that be OK? Let's help Brian fix it up. Start right here and go clear down there. Great. You made it touch here. Can you make it touch up there? Thanks.

How does the teacher decide who will share the pen?

Teachers observe their students as they are reading and writing and take notes so that they will remember what is easy for their students and what presents a problem. They assess their students periodically so that they will know what their children control and what their children need to learn next. In this sense, teachers select children to share the pen during an interactive writing lesson for a variety of reasons. Their objective may be to reinforce the learning a child is taking on, to solidify some new learning that a child has almost mastered, or to get feedback on their teaching. What a child does while writing allows the teacher to see whether she needs to reteach, or confirm and praise a particular skill or strategy. For a example, see the section entitled, *Building a Snowman*. In this statement, Esswein reflects on how she used her knowledge of individual students' strengths and needs to make powerful teaching decisions. She had designed a task for the group as a whole, but within that, she was thinking about individual learners. Esswein's story illustrates the multilevel learning that is possible in the interactive writing context. In the context of writing a meaningful message, she was able to:

- Provide a model and practice for Tiffany in establishing word-by-word matching in reading.
- Engage Megan in the task of writing.
- Support letter learning for Wesley, Tiffany, and Cody.

Interactive Writing in Kindergarten:

Taking Care of Classroom Pets

Sharon Esswein

In Sharon Esswein's kindergarten classroom, Etna Road School, Whitehall, Ohio, the students wrote a list of rules for taking care of the classroom pet turtles. One rule the children wanted to write was *Don't turn the turtles upside down*. When it was time to write the word *Don't*, Sharon prompted the children to say the word slowly and analyze the sounds they heard. They heard the *D* and one child was invited to the easel to write the letter. They were able to hear the *t* when they said *don't* slowly a few times. Sharon filled in the other letters.

Sharon helped the children learn to make connections by linking the next word, *turn*, to a student's name. She said, "Say *turn* slowly. *Turn...Tonia*. They begin the same, don't they?"

She then pointed to Tonia's name on the name chart hanging nearby. The children were accustomed to using their classmates' names listed on the chart to make links from what they know to what they were trying to spell and write. The next word, *the* was a known word and was written very quickly by one student.

Engagement in interactive writing offers children many opportunities to learn to spell and write high frequency words. Many of Sharon's kindergartners learned *the*, *I*, *we*, and other core words during the first weeks of school. Sharon and her students finished writing the sentence, talking about how to spell and write the words while simultaneously thinking about the meaning of the message they were creating.

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- Support learning of high frequency words for Joey.
- Extend the learning about how words work for Jessica and Katy.
- Help Antone develop the concept of using space between words.

It is obvious that the experience, levels, and needs of members of her class were different; yet, the activity was one in which they all participated. Members of the group had a chance to learn appropriate skills during the instructional conversation of the lesson.

How can I extend the word study that emerges in interactive writing lessons to other parts of my program?

To promote further learning, the teacher can extend the study about words to the literacy centers. For example, in Esswein's classroom the children discussed the *ing* chunk as they wrote about what they wanted to do when their third grade buddies came for a visit. Esswein's mini-teaching point helped the children notice how *ing* can be used in *looking*, *going*, and *reading*. As they talked, she wrote these words on chart paper. Later that day, Esswein transported the chart to the ABC center and the children used it as a resource as they made two or three *ing* words with magnetic letters at center time. The next day she placed it in the writing center and the children used it as a resource as they wrote invitations to their buddies.

How can I learn more about interactive writing?

To learn more about interactive writing, see:

Button, K., Johnson, M. J., & Furgerson, P. (1996). Interactive writing in a primary classroom. *The Reading Teacher*, 49(6), 446-454.

McKenzie, M. G. (1985). Shared writing: Apprenticeship in writing. *Literacy Matters (1 & 2)*. ENG.: Idea Center for Language in Primary Education.

Pinnell, G. S., & McCarrier, A. (1994). Interactive writing: A transition tool for assisting children in learning to read and write. In E. Hiebert and B.

Taylor (Eds.), *Getting reading right from the start: Effective early literacy interventions*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Wiley, Barbara Joan, (1999). The how and why of interactive writing. In I. Fountas & G. S. Pinnell (Eds.), *Voices on word matters*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Authors' note

We would like to thank Sharon Esswein, kindergarten teacher and literacy coordinator at Etna Road Elementary School in Whitehall, Ohio, for providing the examples used in our article.

BUILDING A SNOWMAN
Teacher Decision Making:
Acting on Student Knowledge
Sharon Esswein

Sharon Esswein describes her thinking process during an interactive writing lesson with her kindergartens.

I would like to talk with you today about a piece of interactive writing that we did in my kindergarten class. We are in mid-January in Columbus, Ohio, so we are sort of in the middle of a lot of cold weather. We have been reading lots of books related to snow. We have been writing directions about how to make a snowman. We had already written 3 directions. So far we had written:

1. First make a big ball.
2. Then you make a medium ball.
3. Make a small ball for the head.

Today we were going to write the fourth direction. So we started the lesson by rereading the directions we had written on previous days.

I choose a boy named Brandon to point to the text as the class read it together with him in a shared reading activity. I picked Brandon because I knew he would be a good model. He could easily point to the words as we read them. I also knew that it was important for us to remember what we had written so far so we could think about what might logically be the next step in making a snowman.

I then choose a little girl named Tiffany to do the one-to-one pointing as the text was read a second time. I choose her because she was a new girl in our class, and after observing her for a week, I didn't think she had one-to-one matching. But because she was very eager to try I decided this would be a good time for me to assess her on this early strategy. When I put the pointer stick in her hand I could tell by her body language that she really wanted to do it by herself. But, as she began pointing, I realized that she was moving all over the page. That was when I gave her the additional support she needed by guiding her hand with mine.

We then began talking about what we needed to do next to make a snowman. I said, "What needs to go next? We have the three balls now." The first person I called on said we needed to add sticks for the arms. I got a lot of other ideas from children who had their hands raised. I was trying to engage everyone in the group by calling on as many children as time and interest would allow. The last little girl I picked was Megan. Megan is a child I need to pull in to a lesson right away. If I don't she loses interest in the task at hand. She said, "What about the boots?" I told her to keep that idea in her head. I want her to know that it was an important idea and that we'd need that sometime in our writing.

The text that we decided to write was:

4. Put two sticks for the arms.

For the first word put, I choose Wesley to come up to write the t. Wesley is working really hard on letter identification and during his guided reading lesson the previous day we had worked on the letter t. We had read *Huggle's Breakfast* and we had worked on the t in telephone. I said, "Wesley, come on up. We're going to make that t we worked on yesterday." I tried to make that link for him. I asked him, "Wesley do you remember when we made that word that started with a t? Remember what Huggles ate?" He said, "The telephone." "You remember the t?" I asked. He thought he did. He put the first stick down and then went on to make something that looked more like an E so, we used the correction tape. At this point, I knew that he needed a little more support so I said, "Wesley you already have the stick down, good job. Now all we need to do is put a cross on it." He was able to do that. I told him, "You make a t." Then I asked, "Wesley, what did you just make?" He said, "A t." What's important here is that I'm getting him to say the letter as well as to write it.

I had Jessica make the word two. Jessica is a high progress student who is working on some beginning words. When I asked about the word two somebody spelled T-O. So we talked about the different ways to write the word two. I choose Jessica because I knew it would be valuable for her to be able to write the word that says two and to talk about all of the three ways to write that word-T-O, T-O-O, and T-W-O.

Before we wrote the word *sticks* I asked the class, "Did Jessica leave a space on her own because she didn't have anybody come up and help her make one?" One little boy, Antone, said, "No, I don't think she did." So I asked Antone to come and put in the next space with his hand. Before he did I asked him to show me where Jessica had left a space, I said, "Put your hand in there. Now, you put the next space." That stretched Antone with what he needed to know as far as the need for spacing between words.

For the next word, *sticks*, I choose Katy. Katy was working on word endings. After she had written the first part of the word, I said, "Katy what else do you hear?" She didn't hear anything. So I asked her to say the word *sticks* slowly and listen for the sound at the end. She still didn't hear anything. So, I said, "Listen for the sound at the end as I say the word slowly. Then I said the word and stressed the last sound. Katy said, "I hear an s." My prompts became more and more specific until she was able to hear that final sound. So, with Katy, we were working with word endings.

I had Kristen who was working on known words write the word *for*. At the same time I had Tiffany come back up and show me the two f's in her name on the name chart. At the same time Kristen was writing a word, I was

reinforcing for Tiffany the names of the letters in her name that she is working on learning.

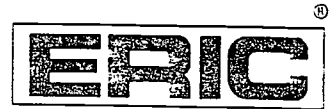
Next, I asked the class who could write the word *the* for me. I know that quite a few could already do it but that some are still working on it. Joey eagerly raised his hand. I knew this would be something to work on with Joey. In my head, I didn't think he quite knew *the* yet. But, I thought that he might know a few of the letters and that he might get them switched around. This was a good time for me to do some on-the-run assessment. Joey came up and successfully wrote the word *the*. That was a lot of knowledge for me that Joey could write the little word *the* with no help.

I choose Cody to make the *m* in the word *arms*. Cody is working on letter identification. He already knows the letters in his name so I wanted to extend him even further to a new letter name. I asked him to come up to the easel to write the *m* for us. Then I asked him if he knew what the letter *m* looked like. He didn't so I guided him with verbal prompts as I wrote an *m* on the Magna Doodle. A Magna Doodle is a small magnetic chalkboard. I said, "We need to go down up, and down up, and down." So not only could he see it visually but I was also talking him through it as he successfully wrote the *m*. He was really proud of that.

That is just a quick summary of some of the teaching decisions I made during the writing of one sentence. These are by no means all of the decisions I made but just some that stuck out in my mind that I thought would be valuable to share.



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